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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [MARR](#) [CE](#)
SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: A/S BOUCHER PRESSES GOVERNMENT TO MAKE
A VIABLE PEACE PROPOSAL

REF: COLOMBO 1706

Classified By: AMBASSADOR ROBERT O. BLAKE, JR. REASONS: 1.4 (B, D)

11. (C) SUMMARY: In a two-day visit to Sri Lanka, Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs Richard Boucher

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pressed Sri Lankan government and opposition officials to put meaningful proposals on the table for future rounds of peace talks with the Tamil Tigers. Boucher assured the government of Sri Lanka and the Sri Lankan public of U.S. support in the fight against terrorism and willingness to cooperate on security. He also underscored the importance of cooperating with international human rights monitors and taking firm action to investigate and punish human rights abuses. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) In a meeting on October 19 with Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa, Boucher said the U.S. appreciated the enormous pressure that recent Tamil Tiger provocations were bringing on the government to respond. However, it was important to exercise restraint and get to talks in Geneva. Rajapaksa responded that coming to terms with the main opposition United National Party and other "southern" parties on a framework for a peace proposal to the Tigers was the most important order of business for his government. (Septel reports status of a new arrangement for cooperation between the two major parties.) Boucher said the U.S. hoped that Sri Lanka would get a broad-based government that would have the support needed to put a viable peace proposal on the table.

13. (C) Rajapaksa said his government would take a new approach to negotiations. He was less interested in trying to patch up the frayed Ceasefire Agreement than starting a serious dialogue with the Tigers about settlement issues. What did the Tigers want, he asked? Dividing Sri Lanka was off the table. Rajapaksa said he could not imagine offering them more - or less - than his formula of "maximum devolution." Boucher observed that there are many experts on devolution, including Indian ones, who could help, but it was clearly the Tigers who were most in need of good advice. Did they have the capacity to negotiate meaningfully on devolution? What about the rest of the Tamils who don't support the Tigers, but wanted to participate?

14. (C) Rajapaksa responded that the Tamil Tigers' ultimate aim is to break away from Sri Lanka. The Tigers don't want federalism; they want at most confederation, he argued -- and they were willing to kill other people, including Tamils, who don't agree with them. Boucher again urged Rajapaksa to reach out to other groups such as the UNP, put forward a realistic proposal, and seek a commitment from the Tigers to real negotiations. He hoped the Tigers were finally getting the message that they could not continue to bet on military force as the solution.

¶5. (C) Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera elaborated on Rajapaksa's points. The government did not want to get embroiled in a discussion in Geneva about strengthening a Ceasefire Agreement that was, for practical purposes, dead, he said. The talks should move into core issues that would address questions of a final settlement. Samaraweera said that the level of bitterness had increased in recent months, so the first meeting should have limited objectives, but set a timetable and a framework for future sessions.

¶6. (C) Samaraweera pointed out that the new arrangement with the United National Party would have to become more concrete before the government could make more specific proposals, but a joint committee of legal experts should have a draft in time for a second session that could come as early as November. Samaraweera said that if the United National Party were truly concerned about progress on peace, getting its support should be easy. Otherwise, the President would try to "go above their heads" by going directly to the people, perhaps by holding a referendum.

¶7. (C) In a later meeting, the principal opposition leader, United National Party head Ranil Wickremesinghe, told A/S Boucher there were a number of elements required to gain concessions from the Tigers at talks. The government must limit the Karuna faction's activities, stop military action, and address the Supreme Court-ordered de-merger of the north and east (reftel). "The government must go (to talks) ready this time. The international community should press for this." Since Tamils still face active discrimination, the government must provide concessions to draw Tamil civilians away from the Tamil Tigers. He claimed that he had done so while serving as Prime Minister, but in his current assessment, "the military has a hard-line Sinhala view," making outreach to the Tamil community difficult.

¶8. (C) On lessons learned from previous, failed rounds of negotiations, Wickremesinghe thought it important to act quickly and set time limits, so as to give the Tigers parameters. The Co-Chairs should continue to urge a return to talks. Wickremesinghe is planning a trip to India in November to meet political leaders; he said he intends to raise the issue of increased Indian engagement with Sonia Gandhi if he meets her.

¶9. (C) Sri Lankan Muslim Conference (SLMC) leader Rauff Hakeem told us that for peace talks to succeed, the Government and facilitators would have to persuade the Tigers to consider core issues. Talks about an interim agreement or "conditions of normalcy" have proven in the past to be mere "time-buying exercises" on the Tigers' part, he said. Because Tamils and Muslims have separate identities as communities, Muslims should have their own delegation to peace talks. However, he expressed confidence that both Government and Tiger leaders know the importance of Muslim concerns) and recognize Muslims must be a party to any future peace agreement.

¶10. (C) COMMENT: A/S Boucher's visit helped keep the Government of Sri Lanka focused on the importance of peace talks. The government's strategy of moving directly into "core issues" will likely meet resistance from Tiger negotiators, who will again want to discuss interim arrangements, including reviving the ceasefire agreement. It will therefore be important to lower expectations for the Geneva talks and emphasize the importance of launching a new process. It will also be important to try to bring down the level of violence that has poisoned the atmosphere for talks, particularly in recent weeks.

¶11. (SBU) Assistant Secretary Boucher cleared this message.
BLAKE